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From: Thames, Sher
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Denver and the West

Colorado, EPA clash over state role in Gold King Mine deluge

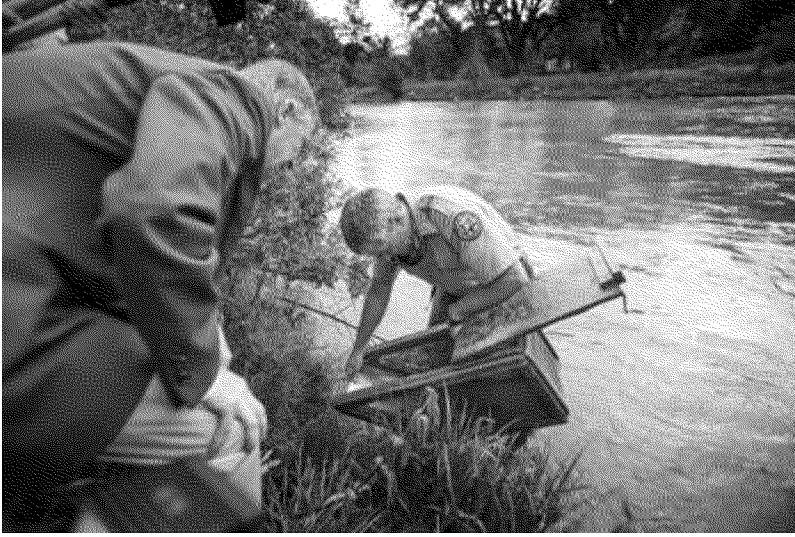
State natural resources officials dispute EPA and Interior Department findings that Colorado experts approved EPA work

By Bruce Finley
The Denver Post

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Colorado officials are disputing Environmental Protection Agency accounts of the botched cleanup at an inactive mine that spilled 3 million gallons of toxic heavy metals into the Animas River, saying state experts gave advice but did not approve EPA actions.

An EPA internal review of the disaster found that state Division of Reclamation Mining and Safety experts supported EPA work, aimed at draining the Gold King Mine above Silverton by digging through debris and opening the main portal. The Interior Department's Bureau of Reclamation also investigated and in October concluded state experts approved EPA efforts to drain the mine.

However, Colorado natural resources director Mike King said in a Sept. 2 letter to the EPA that "no one at DRMS directed any work at Gold King, nor did any DRMS personnel approve or disapprove any of the work EPA was conducting there."

While two state experts observed EPA work at the mine, they weren't present during the Aug. 5 spill and "did not support the removal investigation at the Gold King," King's letter said.

Colorado "has worked collaboratively with EPA toward the shared objective of improving water quality in the Upper Animas River Watershed. EPA initiates the requests for consultation which are advisory in nature and typically informal. ... Operations at Gold King were entirely under EPA management using EPA contractors on an EPA response action, " the letter said.

State officials first released the letter to The Associated Press, in response to an open records request, then later to The Denver Post.

The state experts, inactive mines program director Bruce Stover and geological engineer Allen Sorenson couldn't be reached Thursday night.

The Gold King deluge worsened contamination of the Animas, turning it mustard-yellow as waste flowed from Colorado into New Mexico and Utah, including Ute and Navajo land.

King on Thursday elaborated: "We appreciate what EPA was attempting to do at the Gold King mine. We share EPA's desire to see those historic mine sites cleaned up. The investigation's conclusions into the events surrounding the discharge were not consistent with our staff's involvement and we felt it important to make sure the investigators were aware of our perspective."

Tens of thousands of inactive mines in Western states continue to contaminate headwaters of the nation's rivers, including at least 230 sites in Colorado where state officials have documented degradation of waterways. Stopping the harm has proved difficult.



A woman from Weston Solutions walks next to one of the retention ponds at the bottom of Gold King Mine on Aug. 13, 2015. (*Brent Lewis, Denver Post file*)

At the Gold King, the EPA crew misjudged the volume and pressure of backed-up toxic wastewater. Contractors used heavy machinery to clear debris and insert a drain pipe, triggering the deluge.

The EPA's internal review said state experts indicated similar techniques were used at other mine sites, including the Captain Jack Mine west of Boulder, and didn't trigger blowouts. Colorado's response said that, while impounded waste was decanted in this manner, it was done "at sites where there was no overpressure" — information given to the EPA "as general advice only" and not to manage, direct or authorize actions at Gold King.

EPA officials said the agency's inspector general received King's letter in September but that others at the agency didn't see it until Tuesday.

"We continue to have a productive working relationship with the state of Colorado," EPA spokeswoman Nancy Grantham said, "and will review the matters outlined in their letter."

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